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ABSTRACT

The mission of the international program is to enable the preservation of materials in the spirit of worldwide cooperation, and to ensure enduring access among countries and throughout time. The commission's international program involves collaboration among scholars worldwide through the European Commission on Preservation and Access (ECPA), raising awareness and assistance for the preservation problem. The commission's work includes: enriching American and international scholarship; encouraging and coordinating international cooperation in eliminating redundancy and wisely using financial resources; stimulating preservation activities in developed countries; and bringing preservation information to less developed countries. The first step of the program was to identify needs regarding preservation of and access to the world's written knowledge and how to meet these needs. Hundreds of institutions from dozens of countries have contacted the commission for information and guidance. The forthcoming series of program reports, which illustrate the breadth and variety of ECPA's cooperative preservation initiatives, is discussed. (MAS)

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The International Program and Its Global Mission

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Introduction to Report Series

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Introduction to Report Series

The Collective Memory at Risk

If a culture's heritage is, in part, the legacy of its thinkers and writers, then what happens when the written records containing our thoughts, ideas, and histories of events are in danger of being lost? No less devastating than the fire in Alexandria's library or the bombs of war are the destructive elements at work in all libraries, archives, museums, and collections. Dust, mold, dampness, pests, acidic paper, and simply age itself are conspiring to decimate the written word everywhere, and once that is gone, we forfeit both self-knowledge and the ability to understand our multiple histories. We are losing, at an alarming rate, an enormous proportion of our collective memory, a memory which scholars, researchers, historians, scientists—in fact, nothing less than the entire thinking world—need to understand the past and influence the future. But in report after report, from libraries and archives everywhere, comes the appalling statistic that on average at least a quarter of all holdings are turning to dust, their acidic paper dooming them to brittle decay.

Salvation is imperative and available. Through the use of mass conservation techniques — the deacidification of paper and the transference of paper records to microfilm and digital records — we can slow down and help prevent the disintegration of our collective memory. The Commission's international program, since its inception in 1988, has had a critical mission: to enable the preservation of materials in the spirit of worldwide cooperation, and to ensure enduring access among countries and throughout time. What we currently read in books and access through computers must be available and accessible years from now, in an ever-changing arena. Yet, what one advanced country can manage, a less developed country cannot even hope to attain without help.

The International Program

When the Commission envisioned its work on an international level, it saw its goals as enriching American and international scholarship, encouraging and coordinating international cooperation in eliminating redundancy and wisely using financial resources, stimulating preservation activities in advanced countries, and bringing preservation information to and supporting preservation activities in less developed countries. Efforts that began in Western Europe and some Central and Eastern European countries have expanded to embrace dozens of other countries, some of which will appear in the Commission's forthcoming series of international reports.

Striving to do its work without duplicating others' efforts, the international program collaborates with a number of groups worldwide. In concert with such organizations as the

Committee on Scholarly Communication with China and the Association of Ibero-American National Libraries, the Commission program has extended its reach and promoted cooperation, enabling archivists and librarians to be the healers of their own collections and encouraging model projects in countries where a ripple effect can lead to even more wide-reaching know-how. UNESCO's involvement in 1993 underlined even more clearly the growing awareness, on an international level, that recorded history is in grave danger. The UNESCO call to action echoes a major goal of the Commission. According to a statement from UNESCO's *Memory of the World* initiative:

> *Known and unknown library and archival treasures which constitute a unique memory for the world have been and continue to be lost through natural calamities, war devastations, and from the ravages of climate and weather. The magnitude of the problem of safeguarding this memory is such that it defeats the resources of any single country. An international program is urgently needed to develop a collective plan of action that would set up institutional mechanisms and determine priorities worldwide.*

When the Commission of the European Union (CEU) commissioned a feasibility study for a European Register of Microform Masters (EROMM) in 1989, it designated similar goals: to open cooperative opportunities to all libraries in the European Community as well as to libraries in the rest of the world; to encourage increased archival efforts by national centers; to further collaboration among European libraries; to promote international archiving standards; and to avoid duplication of efforts. Recognizing a kindred agenda (and spirit), the Commission quickly established contact with the CEU, and together they planned for EROMM's first phase.

Originally set up as a pilot database at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris and now housed at the Niedersächsische Staats-und Universitätsbibliothek in Göttingen, when this phase reached its successful conclusion in December 1993, the first database of merged records from England, France, Germany, and Portugal was made available to member countries and to the Commission on Preservation and Access for distribution to U.S. bibliographic utilities. These records are being loaded onto RLIN (Research Libraries Information Network) in order to reach U.S. library and scholarly communities, leading to one reviewer's comment that this database, a merging of four European countries, is "a technical first." Since 1993, additional countries have applied for admission into EROMM. Clearly the mission for international preservation and access is being addressed by an ever-growing number of countries.

To read about what has been achieved so far is to realize the extent of preservation programs in the international community. With microfilming projects underway in Algeria, Australia, Brazil, Brunei, Canada, Chile, China, Finland, Egypt, Germany, England, France, Hungary, Israel, Italy, Japan, Liechtenstein, the Philippines, Poland, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Syria, Taiwan, Tunisia, and Venezuela (as well as other projects, which are beginning all the time), more nations than ever are in the midst of a movement dedicated to preserving materials and making them available. Exciting work is being done. In Yemen a CD-ROM will contain selections of Koranic fragments; in Bulgaria the same technique has preserved manuscripts, texts, and photographs relating to Saint Sophie, the patron saint of Bulgaria's capital. A report on the bibliographic work being done with the help of the Commission must include mention of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, which has now converted the bibliographic records of more than 140,000 volumes of microfilmed nineteenth-century French monographs to machine-readable U.S. compatible format. In Seville, Spain, ten million documents from the Archivo General de Indias detailing Spain's power in the Americas have been digitized, and a collaborative project between the Archivo and U.S. institutions is being planned to test the accessibility of the digital archive to U.S. researchers.

Such extensive undertakings require a central organization if efforts aren't to be fruitlessly duplicated. It was with this in mind that in 1993 European and U.S. scholars met in Bellagio, Italy, under the auspices of the Commission. The meeting's purpose, to establish an ongoing

international collaboration among scholars for the preservation of our global intellectual heritage, was achieved in the unanimous passage of the formation of the European Commission on Preservation and Access (ECPA). The 17 members are from the various, yet inter-connected, worlds of universities, academic and learned societies, libraries, archives, and publishing. All eminent European scholars and professionals in these fields, members are committed to promoting a European effort through the flow of information and the coordination of national and regional activities. This catalytic role is essential in raising awareness and assistance for a problem which threatens the accumulated human record. If one of the goals of the international program is to promote cooperation between countries, then the ECPA certainly embodies this ideal.

Currently housed at the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences in Amsterdam, the ECPA has as its first chairman Professor Pieter Drenth (also President of the Academy), who will serve as a contributing author in this report series. Professor Klaus-Dieter Lehmann, Director of the Deutsche Bibliothek and a member of the Commission on Preservation and Access in the U.S., serves as vice-chairman. Most recently, in October 1994 an ad hoc executive meeting initiated the development of a position paper on the ECPA's essential activities, aims, and priorities.

The Report Series

The first push of the international program was to identify needs regarding preservation of and access to the world's written knowledge and how to meet these needs. Over the past several years, hundreds of institutions from dozens of countries have contacted the U.S.-based Commission for information and guidance as they seek to salvage their collections. With the creation of the ECPA it becomes possible to extend the program's findings in other parts of the world.

The forthcoming series of international program reports promises to be both instructive and enlightening. Here is a chance to see what is happening in libraries and archives around the world—some of which have only recently become open once again to the West. Such is the case in Bulgaria, a country that will be highlighted in the series' first report by Sonja Jordan, Head of Preservation at the University of Notre Dame. It is remarkable to read about this country, isolated for over 50 years, with a long tradition of manuscripts rather than the printed word (only entering the world of printing and publishing in 1876—just in time for the age of acidic paper). With a decentralized system and minimal resources, Bulgaria's libraries are struggling to save their national holdings. For the first time, as the post-Communist country deals with great change, libraries are being asked to define their mission and purpose.

In her visit Jordan toured the national library: the country's fourth largest library with depository responsibilities for the region; a public library with, as yet, no preservation program; a university library with graduate classes in library science; and one of the oldest extant religious libraries outside a monastery. The libraries of Bulgaria suffer from lack of experience in the fields of preservation and access, and they struggle daily with a political structure that does not yet offer them the stability necessary for moving into greater technology. But they are eager for "reform, modernization, and leadership," and Jordan's contacts with representative libraries and librarians illustrate a national library system that we have not had access to until 1989.

Future reports will include a look at the libraries in Latin America, as reported by Dan Hazen, Harvard University Librarian for Latin America, Spain, and Portugal, after a meeting of

the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) in Havana, Cuba, in August 1994. The importance of training work is clearly a priority, and also of interest is the librarians' concern that preservation products and processes be based on local, and not imported, materials. As with Bulgaria, the report makes clear the librarians' great desire to find ways to preserve their collections, with often different situations and goals than their North American counterparts.

Professor Drenth has written on the preservation of our intellectual heritage with an emphasis on the state of the world's "collective memory": monographs, series, journals, and other paper materials that contain the writings of our culture and age. The report is based on a talk he gave to several European audiences, including the Standing Conference of Rectors, Presidents, and Vice-Chancellors of the European Universities (CRE) at its 43rd biannual conference in Thessaloniki, April 1994. Drenth strives to synthesize the problems, the methods by which to combat these problems, and what is being done around the globe. In so doing, he succeeds in giving the background history so necessary for getting on with the work toward solutions.

A report by Dr. Werner Schwartz, Director of the Technical Department at the Staats-und Universitätsbibliothek Göttingen and Coordinator of EROMM, is similarly important for its definitive explanation of the European Register of Microfilm Masters. Microfilm remains one of the most reliable methods of preservation, and with the possibility of such a register becoming permanent and international, Schwartz's report, based on a talk he gave at the 1994 Annual Meeting of LIBER (Ligue des Bibliothèques Européennes de Recherche) in Göttingen (July 1994), provides historical context and contemporary understanding.

These and other reports illustrate the breadth and variety of cooperative preservation initiatives underway. As scholars have always known, the wisdom of the world must be shared. Having access to the history, literature, art, philosophy, science, journalism, cultural studies, and knowledge from all lands is vital if we are to maintain the global community we have already become.

For more information, see the following. All are available from three sources: through the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), on the Internet, and in on-demand reprinted form from the Commission.

Commission annual reports and newsletters, 1988 –.

Computerization Project of the Archivo General de Indias, Seville, Spain. March 1992.

Preservation and Access in China: Possibilities for Cooperation. March 1992.

Preserving the Intellectual Heritage. A Report of the Bellagio Conference June 7-10, 1993. October 1993.

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